

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART FIVE

Once we understand the offer God makes to us to be comforted, to have His strength within when we are under pressure, we have a choice to make. We can accept His mercy and forgiveness through the cross of Christ and then begin to be the delicious aroma, the tender love letter, the dazzling light, and the miraculous mirror of Jesus to the world. Accepting the Lord's gift means letting go of the embarrassment of failure, the cunning deception and the twisted message we clung to before, and seizing hold of the obvious truth in Jesus which will show from us to a needy world as Christ shines from within.(4:1,2)

The inability of those who are rejecting Christ to understand even a simple passage of scripture has two causes. The hardness of their hearts puts a veil between them and Christ in His word and in others, but at the same time Satan, the god of this world,(Jn.12:31; I Jn.4.4; 5:19) blinds their minds to the truth. If they read the Bible they see only words, stories, history, poetry and above all, rules. They miss Jesus who springs from every page if we let God teach us. Jesus makes an invisible God visible in human form.(Col.1:15) So, as those who are being comforted in hard times, point people not to ourselves but to Him, and what others see in us will quietly confirm the truth they hear.(4:3-6)

Paul's picture shifts now from a light shining from within to an earthen pot containing treasure. He drew on the common Old Testament image of the potter creating a pot from a lump of clay.(Isa.29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer.18:1-6) The Hebrew word 'potter' is the same as 'maker'. A sovereign God patiently but firmly creates a unique individual in each of us. Like the clay we have two choices, let Him do it, or harden against Him. If the clay continued to resist the potter beyond the point where his purpose could still be accomplished, he might bake it and then destroy it, a vivid illustration of the judgement of God.(Jer.19:1-13) The purpose of all pots is to contain something.(Rom.9:19-23) As Christians, the Potter's amazing purpose is that we should contain the treasure of Christ, and so the immeasurable riches of His grace.(Eph.2:7; 3:8) A very ordinary looking earthen pot can be privileged to contain a fabulous treasure.(4:7)

The next few verses describe a variety of threats to the pot but how it will survive each one, as we will survive as Christ's treasure pots. 'Afflicted', as we saw in chapter one, means 'under pressure'. The promise is that we will not be 'crushed', 'compressed into a small space'. 'Perplexed' means 'at a loss', literally 'without a resource', but there will always be hope in Jesus. 'Persecuted' describes being pursued, but we will not be on our own. 'Struck down' pictures a boxer being knocked to the floor, but not knocked out. Just as death did not destroy Jesus because, as promised, the Father raised Him to life again, so as we reckon ourselves dead to life run by us, His life in us will be revealed. This is to be a moment by moment attitude with moment by moment consequence in the way we face trouble.(4:8-12)

But just what is this moment by moment attitude which can lead to such a profound difference in our lives? Simply believe Him. Take Him at His word. He promises grace beyond measure, not just out there some time in heaven, but in us now as His Spirit. Say 'thank you' and receive all He has given. God's glory, all that He is, will overwhelmingly show in all we are, all we do and all we say. More and more people will be touched by grace, and the light can be switched on in them too.(4:13-15)

When we look at ourselves in the mirror each morning, the outside of us may be a little older, greyer and more wrinkly. But when we look at the mirror of Christ in His word every day, the inner person is becoming eternally younger, more beautiful, and freer from the wrinkles of sin. When we look at afflictions, the pressures on us, they seem huge. When we look at the comfort of Christ within, they now look trivial by comparison. Which really matters, today or forever?(4:16-18)

In chapter five, Paul continued his theme of how Christ in us works out by moving from the illustration of treasure in a pot to three new pictures.

5:1-4 Q.1 What two pictures did Paul employ in this first section to explain how the new life inside will change the way we look at our present life? What will happen eventually to our earthly bodies? How will our new bodies be different from the old ones?(I Cor.15:35-58) How does knowing this change the way we look at ourselves now? How does the second picture help to remove our anxiety about letting go of present behaviour and possessions?(Eph,4:20-24)

5:5-10 Q.2 What does God give us which keeps us confident that the exchanges of the old for the new really will take place? What is our part in gaining this confidence? What in this context is meant by 'walk by faith not by sight'? On whom do we keep our eyes? Whom do we want to please? How do these questions help us to understand faith?

5:11-15 Q.3 How does the exchange of the old life for the new change our motivation, our passion, and our hope? What may the world say about us because of the choice we have made?(I Cor.2:10; Acts 26:24) What compelling force now controls our lives? How did Jesus Christ demonstrate this force in His own life?

5:16-19 Q.4 How does the new life within us change the way we look at others, at Jesus and at ourselves? What from here on will be the purpose of our lives? What do we now want to do for others? How in practice can we bring this about? What first has to happen to us?

5:20,21 Q.5 To what post in God's government have we been appointed? What is the relationship of such a person to his or her head of state? What preparation is essential if we are to play such a role faithfully?